

SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION 266

By Southerland

A RESOLUTION to recognize and honor the memory of Elizabeth "Betty" Hicks Williams, a champion for education in early-twentieth-century East Tennessee.

WHEREAS, the members of this General Assembly take great pride in recognizing those stalwart individuals in our State's history who have contributed to education, enriching the lives of our children and preparing them for what lies ahead; and

WHEREAS, one such individual was Elizabeth "Betty" Hicks Williams, an ancestral matriarch of many of the Williams families in Cocke and Sevier counties and a woman whose compassionate desire for an accessible community school significantly contributed to the educational landscape in early-twentieth-century East Tennessee; and

WHEREAS, on March 16, 2017, the Cocke County Education Foundation honored the memory of Betty Williams at its annual Celebrate Our Success banquet; proceeds collected from the banquet went to the foundation's scholarship fund, which includes the Elizabeth Hicks Williams Memorial Scholarship; and

WHEREAS, Elizabeth Hicks was born January 9, 1860, a little over a year before the Civil War ripped America apart; she was the only child of Perry and Mary Ann Hicks, both members of pioneer families who settled in the Bogard community of Cocke County; and

WHEREAS, Elizabeth's father died shortly after her birth, leaving her mother, who was called Polly Ann, a young widow for the second time; her first husband was James Huff, with whom she had two daughters, Maranda and Harriet; and

WHEREAS, Polly Ann Hicks herself was a force to be reckoned with; as the head of an all-female household, she managed to fend off more than one attempt by prowling soldiers and

bushwhackers who aimed to take what little the family possessed; all three of her daughters lived into adulthood and married; and

WHEREAS, Elizabeth Hicks, known universally as Betty, married Anderson Ance Williams on December 23, 1880, and just over a year later, the first of their eleven children arrived; between 1881 and 1901, Betty Williams gave birth to ten boys and one girl. In the days of high infant mortality, all eleven of the Williams children lived into adulthood, with some celebrating ninety or one hundred birthdays; and

WHEREAS, growing up during the Civil War and Reconstruction, Betty Williams likely had little, if any, formal education; perhaps in part because of this, she wanted more for her children, thus beginning her fervent desire for a viable community school; and

WHEREAS, the Williams family lived on the Cocke-Sevier County line in a log house; when the Williams children were still school-aged, Sevier County opened Juniper School, which is likely where the children obtained their education; and

WHEREAS, shortly after World War I, Sevier County announced its intention of consolidating, and effectively closing, Juniper School; this concerned Betty Williams greatly, as her grandchildren would be left with no community school; and

WHEREAS, Mrs. Williams, perhaps drawing upon the courage and resolve instilled in her by her mother, began a passionate campaign to reinstate a school in her community; she was integral in the ultimate donation of family property that sits partly in Cocke and partly in Sevier counties, property that would become the site of the new Sunset Gap community school; and

WHEREAS, because Sunset Gap was located in two counties, each county provided one teacher for the school. In those days, the presence of Presbyterian missionaries in the mountains of Appalachia was significant, and these missionaries were especially concerned with education in the region; therefore, the Presbyterians provided the principal for the Sunset Gap school; and

WHEREAS, in addition to regular classes, Sunset Gap boasted an infirmary, where area children received inoculations for diphtheria and other childhood diseases; like many schools of

the day, Sunset Gap doubled as a church on Sunday, with services led by Presbyterian ministers; and

WHEREAS, after World War II, with better roads and easier travels through the mountain terrain, many country schools were closed, and children were bused to more modern facilities; Sunset Gap was no exception; and

WHEREAS, it was quite possible that, after the school's closing, the building could have been neglected and fallen into disrepair; however, the members of the community found ways to put the building to good use over the years. It has served as the home of scout troops, preschools, ladies Bible studies, food preservation classes, and the Sunset Gap Thrift Store, which is currently housed in the former school building; and

WHEREAS, Betty Williams made significant contributions to early education in Cocke and Sevier counties, and it is fitting that we honor her memory; now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED BY THE SENATE OF THE ONE HUNDRED TENTH GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF TENNESSEE, THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES CONCURRING, that we hereby join with the Cocke County Education Foundation in honoring the memory of Elizabeth "Betty" Hicks Williams, an education advocate in early-twentieth-century East Tennessee whose efforts positively impacted children throughout her community.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that an appropriate copy of this resolution be prepared for presentation with this final clause omitted from such copy.